

GENDERED MARGINALIZATION OF DISABLED BODIES: UNDERSTANDING 'MARGINALIZATION' AS (PERHAPS) THE MOST DANGEROUS FORM OF OPPRESSION.

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ABSTRACT

The essay applies Iris Marion Young's discussion of marginalization as a form of oppression suffered differentially by specific social groups, in relation to women with disabilities. It draws on Young's frame, which desegregates 'oppression', taking it away from theories overarching and systematic structures of racism for example, or patriarchy, presenting instead the concept of oppressed groups as overlapping rather than distinct, and of oppression as multiplex and differentially affecting different social groups. The essay considers women with disabilities in terms of their vulnerability to marginalization, one of Young's five types of oppression.

Key words: oppression, marginalization, disability, gender.

INTRODUCTION

The issue that this essay attempts to address seemed rather simple when I first thought about it. All I had to handle were three key concepts or ideas: *marginalization*, *oppression* and *gender*! So, very happily I started preparing by collecting materials, reading them, taking notes, and talking to different people about the topic. Soon I realized that I was sinking into this quicksand of apparently 'simple' looking straightforward statement, and it was like a black hole where all possible ideas, theories and ideologies were being sucked in. As I started with the concept of 'oppression', it brought other notions like power, equality, difference, domination and 'otherness' along. With the notion of 'power' came 'gender' issues, and different 'isms', and of course, (being a feminist at heart) the ever present, overpowering interpretations of all these issues through the lens of 'feminism'. But then again, feminism never comes in one universal form but in all shapes and sizes trying to cater to diversity, especially of the cultural nature! The central concept of the essay, i.e. 'marginalization' was perhaps less problematic as I took the concept from Iris Marion Young and her understanding of the various forms of oppression. Slowly a very complex but surprisingly a clearer picture started

to emerge where all ideas amalgamated with each other, and made more sense than they did in isolation.

So, here I am, making an attempt to justify Young's statement that '*Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression*'. As Young herself points out in the specific section on marginalization that there are many social groups that fall under this category, I have chosen '*people with disability*,' as my focus group, and '*women with disability*' as my prime concern of discussion. The essay is divided into 5 sections: *Section 1: Power and Oppression* discusses, in brief, the concepts of oppression in relation to power; while *Section 2: Marginalization As A Form of Oppression* looks into this concept as specified by Young and tries to understand what makes it the most dangerous form of oppression. *Section 3: People with Disabilities as a Marginalized Group* makes attempts to reveal the different aspects of marginalized oppression this group suffers from; and *Section 4: Disability and Gender* deals with the 'gender' aspect of marginalized oppression of my focus group by throwing lights on the realities of 'women with disabilities'. *Section 5: Women with Disabilities in Bangladesh* is a very concise depiction of the

conditions of women with disabilities in the context of Bangladesh. Needless to say that this essay takes feminist theories into account, and major concepts are based on Iris Marion Young's book named *'Justice and the Politics of Differences'*.¹

SECTION 1: POWER AND OPPRESSION

The concept of 'oppression' cannot be discussed without taking the concept of 'power' into consideration as 'power' in general means relative powerlessness of one group resulting from 'injustice' of another.² 'Powerlessness', according to Young, in turn is a form of oppression, and the word 'oppression' also connotes concepts like 'subordination' and 'domination' - all indicating to the notion of power (or the absence of it) that gives birth to injustice.

Very often the concept of power is termed as 'zero-sum' meaning that more power one person or a group has, the less another has. According to this calculation, power is 'distributional', and therefore, it is concentrated on key social structures like the state, the economy, class hierarchy etc. But if power was entirely distributional, with some groups completely lacking in power and some with all of it, then there is a problem with the question of resistance because without the possession of some kind of countervailing power, it is impossible to resist. Foucault developed a concept of power that did not locate itself in agencies. His concept of power was, therefore, a critique of Marxist theory of power as an instrument of a class dominance that was understood to originate from economic interest. On the contrary, Foucault saw *power 'as something that is exercised rather than possessed; it is not attached to agents and interests but is incorporated in numerous practices'*.³ For him, power is co-extensive with the social body, and we are all already regulated, and already participants in the networks of power.

Young brings up similar notions about power and oppression in her book. Traditionally the term oppression means the exercise of power or tyranny

by a ruling group. The left movements of the 1960's and the 70's shifted the meaning as in *'disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because of tyrannical power coerces them but because of the collective consequences of everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules.'*⁴ Oppression in this sense is structural and according to Young, it does not always fit the paradigm of conscious, and intentional oppression of one group by the other. Nevertheless, *oppression is 'an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.'*⁵

Young argues that the concept of justice has to begin with the concepts of *domination and oppression*, and that we should bring out issues like decision making, division of labor, culture and social group differences. Social justice requires an explicit acknowledgement of social groups and their differences in order to undermine oppression.⁶ According to her, a denial of social group/s will reinforce group oppression further. She admits that even though groups do not exist without individuals, but at the same time social groups reflect the ways people identify with themselves and others, and in the process they treat others accordingly. Sometimes a group comes to exist only because one group excludes and labels a category of persons, and those labeled now come to identify themselves as a group, and this is done mainly on the basis of their shared oppression.⁷

Young specifies that oppression is often perpetrated by a conceptualization of group differences in terms of unaltered essential natures, and based on that it is determined who deserves what or who is capable of what. She criticizes the ideal of 'impartiality' which suggests that all moral situations should be treated according to the same rule, and claims to provide a universal standpoint that everyone can adopt. At the same time, she denies the differences between subjects. She points out two problems with such ideology: firstly, it feeds "cultural imperialism" by 'allowing the

1. Young, 1990, *Justice and Politics of Differences*, Princeton University Press, USA

2. Young: 1990

3. Barrett, Michel, 1991, *The Politics of truth*, Polity Press, UK, pp. 134-137

4. Young, 1990, pp. 11

5. Frye, M, as cited in Young, 1990, pp.11

6. Ibid. pp.3

7. Young, 1990, pp. 46-47

particular experience and perspective of a privileged group as universal'; and secondly, there is an assumption that the so-called 'experts' can exercise an 'impartial' decision making power.⁸ Moreover, this gives birth to ideas like 'normative gaze', i.e. a single aesthetic scale under which body is scrutinized, and a result of which some bodies are constructed as ugly, disgusting, or degenerated. All these eventually make way for cultural stereotyping of racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and ableism. She points out that in modern society (Young mainly refers to the western modern society, especially to the USA) an obsessive or anxious reaction to the bodily presence of others contributes to oppression.⁹

Young argues that to ensure social justice, we must necessarily include the elimination of institutional domination and oppression. In contexts and societies where social group differences exist and some groups are privileged while others are oppressed (and it will be almost impossible to find any society where 'group differences' 'don't exist'), social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those groups' differences to undermine oppression.

SECTION 2: MARGINALIZATION AS A FORM OF OPPRESSION

According to Young, oppression is the result of the distinctive social practices that establish, maintain and perpetuate subordination. Young has famously named them as '*The Five Faces of Oppression*':

- **Exploitation:** is based on the systematic transfer of the energies or labor of the 'have-nots' to the 'haves' with the result that it maintains and augments the power, status and wealth of the 'haves'.
- **Marginalization:** occurs when specific groups of people are excluded from socially meaningful and socially recognized activities.
- **Powerlessness:** refers to those set of people over whom power is consistently exercised but who have very limited scope to exercise power themselves or to engage in acts of

agency that lead to self-determination, self-expression, and self-actualization.

- **Cultural Imperialism or 'Othering':** it operates through the establishment of a standard or norm that reflects the behaviors, values and beliefs of the dominant group. This standard or norm acts as a reference point against which non-dominant groups are typically found to be deficient or lacking – that is – 'other'. Because subordinated groups are thus 'known' and 'know themselves' through the 'images' of inferiority and deficiency, these images form part of their self-understanding – that is, people who comprise subordinate groups actually feel inferior and may grapple with issues of self-esteem and self-confidence.
- **Violence:** including physical attacks, harassment, intimidation and ridicule – is violence that is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group and not because of anything that they have done. Its systematic and random nature makes members of vulnerable groups live in fear, knowing that they are potential victims of violence.¹⁰

Marginalization refers to a process whereby a subject or a sign is rendered marginal to the center through the exercise of power.¹¹ Young states marginalization as *the 'most dangerous form of oppression'*¹² as under this one heading a whole category of people is excluded, or rather expelled from any kind of useful participation in almost every sphere of life, thus making them subjected to severe material deprivation. There are two more categories of injustice beyond material distribution, especially in capitalist societies that causes more harm to the people from this oppressed group. Firstly, most of the developed countries (i.e. capitalist) provide socio-economic as well as health care support through the system of welfare. But this provision of welfare, according to Young, is another form of injustice as it deprives the dependent of the rights and freedom that any other civilians have. Secondly, it is unjust as it blocks the opportunity for these people to

10. Young, 1990, *Justice and the Politics of Differences*, Princeton University Press, USA

11. Lovell, Terry, 2000, *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*, Arnold, pp.150

12. Young, 1990, pp. 53

⁸ Ibid. pp. 9-10

⁹ Ibid. pp.11

exercise their capacities as per the socially defined and recognized ways.¹³ Young here recalls the early bourgeois liberalism which explicitly excluded from citizenship all those whose reason was questionable or not fully developed, and those who were dependent (naming mainly the poor, women, children, and mentally ill), and then she points out that at present time, in reality, such exclusion of category still exists within the modern liberalism which is based on equal citizenship. People dependent on social welfare for support, for example like the old, poor and the disabled are always subjected to patronizing, punitive, often demeaning and arbitrary treatment both by the state policies as well as the people who are associated with it.

Young explains that there exists a relation between dependency and marginalization, as **marginalization** constructs people as "dependants", which often imply being legitimately subjected to the authority of social service providers and other administrators. She says, *'dependency should not be a reason to be deprived of choice and respect, and much of the oppression many marginals experience would be lessened if a less individualistic model of rights prevailed.'*¹⁴ Dependency on state prohibits the marginalised to become full citizens because there is an assumption that moral agency and full citizenship require a person to be autonomous and independent. Young blames the individualistic model of rights for much of the oppression experienced by the marginalized as it deprives them of choice and opportunities from participation in social life. Moreover, marginalization doesn't cease to be oppressive even if one has the security of food, shelter or access to other basic material resources because marginality remains in the form of uselessness, boredom, lack of self-respect and self-esteem.

Young perceives "Oppression" as a plural concept where group differences are cutting across individual lives in a multiplicity of ways. In other words, individuals can belong to several groups. Privilege and oppression might thus entail for the same person in different respects. For example, being both male and poor, a poor man might be oppressed in relation to a rich man/woman, but privileged in relation to gender, i.e. better off than

an equally poor woman. In that way, a person can be exploited and powerless because of his economic class position, but might not be a victim of 'othering' and 'violence' because of gender, or the other way round. But, an individual belonging to a socially defined/ categorized 'marginal' group (marginalization can spring up from the process of 'othering') is very much likely to be exploited economically for the barriers in participation in mainstream economic activities, which will result in his/her vulnerability to further violence and powerlessness. Therefore, once a group becomes marginalized within a social structure, it is very much possible that individuals of that particular group will be deprived of social justice.¹⁵

The extend to which marginalized people face oppression of all kinds can be better understood if we take a particular group for a detailed analysis, and I have chosen 'people with disabilities' as my focus group for this paper.

SECTION 3: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY AS A MARGINALIZED GROUP

The definition of the term 'disability' is a problematic one as there has been a strong objection raised by the disabled people through their disability movement since 1960s against the way they have been constructed through language and definition¹⁶. In the book *'The Creatures Time Forgot'* by David Hevey, disability is defined as *'the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization, which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairment and thus excludes them*

13. Ibid.

14. Young, 1990:55

15. Nancy Fraser, 1997, *Justice Interruptus*, New York & London: Routledge, objected that the politics of difference advocated by Young is not as globally applicable as is implicated by her argument. Fraser makes an *analytical* distinction between two understandings of injustice: socio-economic injustice, such as exploitation, marginalization and deprivation; and there is injustice that is based in social patterns of representation and interpretation, such as cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect, which results in inhibition with respect to expression and communication. Though I agree with Fraser's analysis of oppression, but for the purpose of this essay, I will restrict my discussion within Young's framework.

16. Treglown, Jane, 1998, *Refiguring Corporeality: Disability, Impairment, and Feminist Theories of the Body*, University of Warwick, pp.6

the mainstream of social activities'.¹⁷ Treglown adopted 'disability as a social condition, organ or mechanism of the body'.¹⁸ But she points out that (and I agree with her) that these definitions are not unproblematic as there is still a danger of 'false universalizing' and of ignoring the diversity of different impairments and other social categories. Nevertheless, these are usual 'as long as there is social oppression based on disability, even though the forms...and the ways it is experienced, may vary greatly among societies and according to other factors, such as age, gender, race, class, religion, caste and sexual identity'.¹⁹

There are four main discourses on disability as identified by Fulcher: medical, lay, charity and rights.²⁰ The 'medical' discourse which centers around professionalism and creates 'experts' who know what is best for the 'patient', and it has a negative personal and social construction of dependency. The 'charity' discourse defines people with disabilities as those that need help, are objects of pity, personally tragic, dependent, eternal children, and low achievers by the ideal or 'normalised' standard. The 'lay' discourse emphasizes the 'otherness' or disability in that bodies that are unfavorably constructed against the 'able-bodied'. There is a kind of fear and discomfort felt around what is perceived as 'abnormal' physical appearances. The 'rights' discourse perhaps provides the most political opportunity for people with disability as it is based on the principles of empowering people with disabilities and tries to guarantee their right to equal access of services enjoyed by mainstream society. This discourse is defined by themes such as self-reliance, independence, consumer wants (rather than 'needs'). It is undeniable that the first three embody a worldview, which constructs disability around notions of disputed degrees of impairment, feared status, and perceptions of disability as a personal issue rather than a public responsibility.²¹

Dependency, as it has been discussed earlier, is a major issue when it comes to marginalization as a

form of oppression, especially regarding people with disabilities. Oliver (1993) notes the idea of dependency as:

*"An inevitable consequence of living in industrial society is that we all live in a condition of mutual dependency. However, the dichotomy of dependence/independence has been a significant influence on both the ways disabled people are perceived in general and on the development of social policies geared towards them in particular."*²²

Oliver summarizes by stating that disability is a form of oppression in which one class oppresses the other, and therefore, disabled people are yet another oppressed class.

Dependency also means 'subordination' or 'subjugation'. In this sense the welfare clients like people with disabilities are subordinate to and of less importance than the state. The process of 'assisting' welfare clients, because it provides them with insufficient income to become full participants/consumers of the range of services which might assist them to become active political players, resulting in their marginalization. The one consistent feature of dependency is that whether it is expressed in the form of subordination, subjugation or marginalization is that it involves a power differential.²³

Hevey points out that through the media, film and literature 'it is clear that this is the impaired body of the disabled person on to which is projected the negative manifestations of that impairment in society'.²⁴ He cites examples from world-famous pieces like Richard III, Frankenstein, and Graham Greene's Raven, villains from films like James Bond (and there are numerous examples that can be cited from Bollywood films) + all have their evilness signified by their impairment, and it is implied that their villainy springs from self-hatred

22. Oliver, 1993:59, as cited in Racism and Disability, <http://www.york.ac.uk/student/su/essaybank/socialpolicy/racism.html>

23. Tomlinson, John, 1997, There but for the grace of wealth go I, presented at the conference 'Beyond Poverty: Citizenship, Welfare, and Well-being in the 21st Century', Massey University, <http://www.geocities.com/ubinz/JT/1997BeyondPoverty.html>

24. Hevey, 2000, The Creatures Time Forgot, Routledge, pp.12

Hevey, 2000, The Creatures Time Forgot, Routledge, UK, pp.9

Ibid.

Wendell, as cited by Treglown, 1998, pp.6

Fulcher, as cited by Bourk, J Michael, 2000, Discussing Disability,

www.tomw.net.au/uso/discrse.html

Ibid.

and bitterness of soul. Therefore, disablement is something that is generally viewed as 'personal tragedy' and loss within the body. And, there are different ideologies that feed into this 'personal tragedy' theory for example, often it is perceived as a punishment from God or done by evil magic; sometimes they are seen as *'bodies warped or malfunctioning, leaving their humanity in doubt'*, considered as neither dead nor fully alive, unidentified, ambiguous people that live in isolation from society. There is also an underpinning view of disability which focuses on the societies where economic survival is a constant struggle, and therefore, people who are 'unproductive' (like the old, weak and impaired) should be either killed at birth or left to die as they threaten this struggle for survival.²⁵

Even though in modern days it might not be so harsh or straight-forwardly cruel in many societies, especially the affluent ones, but there is a sense of *isolation* or *segregation* in terms of people's attitude or state policies when it comes to dealing with people with disabilities. This prejudice is a refusal to identify with a person's reality, and in that way setting them apart from humanity. It is often based on assumptions that the quality of lives experienced by these people is so pathetic and poor that they are not even worth living. Therefore, the services and opportunities provided for people with disabilities also turn into something that is done with a sense of moral superiority and thus, in a way, becomes barrier in itself to the achievement of justice for this marginalized group. Agencies that work often see themselves as better able to make decisions on behalf of people with disabilities than the persons themselves, and thus people with disabilities are denied the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and even adulthood.²⁶

SECTION 4 : DISABILITY AND GENDER:

When one talks about oppression or marginalization, it is difficult not to bring the issue of gender to that discussion. There seems to be a common link between women and people with disabilities as the groups experience oppression,

discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion on a daily basis. But at the same time, it is unfair on the people with disabilities to simply generalize oppression as a whole because oppression based on bodily ability has different causes, meanings and effects. To merge the both groups will be a denial of the specific discrimination against both women and disabled people. Because of the prevailing gender discrimination against women, it is often said that in a way 'all women are disabled', and therefore, they have a better understanding of 'impairment'. One must acknowledge that disability is not an experience only confined to women, but at the same time it is important to see how men and women experience disability on the basis of their gender.

Even after considering all these problematic issues of looking at gender and disability, I still find it unacceptable not to take women with disabilities as a group that is marginalized more than in one way. The position of women with disability is not understood fully by many, and it is argued that this position is due to her being a woman and a person with a disability, which leaves her in a position of ambiguity. Where does her alliance lie? Is it the woman's movement or the disability movement? The former is oriented to non-disabled women, and the latter to disabled men.²⁷ Women with disabilities face inequality between men with disabilities and non-disabled women as well. Women with disabilities are, therefore, marginalized and dis-empowered by two movements, which could be an effective platform for advocating their rights. Women with disabilities are further isolated by treated by planners as 'special needs' group, which is viewed with pity and charity but with very little understanding.

According to Jenifer Lee and Shirley White, women with disabilities is a little recognized group, perhaps a sub-minority that receives prejudice and discrimination from both angles: their gender, and their disability.²⁸ It is true that all people with disabilities are at the risk of being denied their gender because very often they are not given the opportunity to fill important

25. Ibid. pp.12-13

26. Hanely, Pat, 1998, Voluntary – Sector Associations as Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution: Empowering People with Disabilities, NILEPA newsletter, June

27. Francis, Julian, 1995, Review of the Position of People with Disability in Bangladesh, submitted to AMOD, British High Commission, Dhaka

28. Lee and White, 2000, Economic Sufficiency of Women with Disability, <http://www.dinf.ne.jp/doc/prdl/othr/z00ap/z00ap00305.html>

social/biological/emotional roles, such as mother, father, wife, lover etc. This can have a detrimental effect especially on women with disabilities as they often have to put their disability first and womanhood second.²⁹

The first and foremost barrier that any woman with disability has to experience is perhaps the 'body image'. Body image is something that is important to all in forming self-identity. Much feminist theory has been focused on identifying the reality that women's bodies are objectified for the purpose of male pleasure and domination. Recent studies have covered aspects of cultural representation of disabled bodies. These approaches are feminist inspired, and follow on from feminist concerns with social/cultural representations of femininity, cultural stereotypes, norms of physical beauty and etc. from this perspective, the particular situation of women with disabilities is a more extreme version of the general experience of all women. Many blame (and justifiably) the media to a great extent for this negative image of disability. Women (as well as men) with disabilities are almost invisible in the media except the occasional depiction of their lives in a rather distorted form through romantic or bizarre portrayal of child-like dependency or monster-like anger. This in many ways do contribute to the increasing discomfort of others when they come in contact with women with disabilities, and also it perpetuates the sense of 'otherness' that women with disabilities may feel. Contemporary media views of disability show a tendency of exaggeration and romanticization of disability - good examples of this can be contemporary Hindi-Bengali drama serials in which disability is shown especially in the case of evil men/hero as a punishment, and also his disability is used for the glorification of the 'epitome of virtue', i.e. heroine in terms of confirming feminine qualities like forgiveness, nurturing and compassion etc. Such representation can be compared with the prevailing focus on beauty and normality. These values are deeply divisive for all women, but particularly oppress those bodies do not fit the stereotype.³⁰

Shildrick and Price are of the view that disabled bodies are constructed in order to secure the identity of able-bodiedness. There is a constant policing of the boundaries between the notions of health and disease, between the 'beautiful' and the 'grotesque', and in that process it disables people with impairment further.³¹ These qualities are defined (socially and economically) by the dominant culture, and by those who are in power i.e. primarily white, able-bodied, heterosexual men. However, many women with disabilities argue that a great deal of feminist analysis may not be reflective of all women's experience, especially for the ones who are labeled as 'disabled'. In reflecting societal beliefs regarding disability, their bodies become objectified for the purpose of domination, but within a different context. The author/s of an article titled '*Body Beautiful/ Body Perfect: Challenging the Status Quo: where Do women with Disabilities Fit In?*' points out the realities that women with disabilities live in their daily lives.³² Disability is considered as something 'undesirable'. This message is often internalized, and it has a great impact on self-identity. A distorted image of an incomplete woman - a woman incapable of participating in the roles that are usually expected of women, is formed in early years, and these are confirmed or altered by the responses or evaluations made by others. And for many disabled women, society's belief in the lack of their physical attractiveness hampers their ability to get beyond physical differences.

Disabled bodies are often objectified as part of medical process. Most of them since childhood, had to display their bodies to group of male doctors in the guise of 'medical treatment' without prior knowledge or consent. 'We may have been asked to strip, walk back and forth in front of complete strangers so that they can get a better view of what the physical 'problem' is, or to mutually manipulate our limbs to determine flexibility and dexterity'.³³ It further implies that because of intrusive medical intervention and popular methods of cosmetic surgery, there is a need felt by these women to change or to alter their 'imperfect' bodies. To be non-disabled is the

29. Swift, Karin, 1998, 'What is the Impact of Disability on Gender?' WWDA, Australia

30. Davies et al., 1987 as cited by Shakespeare, Tom, 1994, Cultural Representation of Disabled: dustbins for disavowal, in Barton & Oliver eds., 1997, Disability Studies: Past Present Future, Leeds: The Disability Press

31. Shildrick & Price, as cited by Treglown, 1998, pp.26

32. Author/s Unknown, 2001, Body Beautiful/Body Perfect: Challenging the Status Quo: Where Do Women With Disabilities Fit In? <http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/7319/sex.html>

33. Ibid.

'ideal' and there is an expectation for the quest of the 'perfect body'.

There is a further marginalization for women with disabilities as far as body is concerned. Cathy Spicer specifies that women of this group, especially the ones with intellectual disabilities be at the receiving end of a dose of marginalization because they are not perceived as 'normal' women³⁴. This perception allows society to believe that it is all right to objectify these women, and debate their right to freedom of sexual expression, to maintain bodily integrity and personal inviolability. Such assumptions lead to the blatant eugenics policies aimed at the elimination of disabilities through sterilization programs. Joan Hume strongly criticizes the pre-natal screening and diagnostic technologies through which eugenic values are operating in their promotion and application. She states that eugenics operates when women with disabilities are pressured not to have children, when non-disabled women are encouraged to use the tests during pregnancies to detect and eliminate ever increasing numbers of detectable disabling conditions. The presumption that a positive test result will inevitably be followed by an abortion, which according to Hume, (and I agree with her) is disrespectful to people with disabilities. This sends a message to disabled people that it is not acceptable for many parents to have a disabled baby; and also to women that *'for a woman to give birth to anything less than a perfect baby is not only socially and economically undesirable but also irresponsible.'*³⁵

If a woman with disability is also colored (in the case of White dominated West) or of ethnic minority (applicable to most countries), they are at an even further disadvantage. Participation would then seem virtually impossible, making them at a high risk of economic dependency. Ayesha Vernon notes how gender, color and disability – all together can make participation in society extremely difficult even in a welfare state like the

UK³⁶. She records the experiences of extreme marginalization (in a combination of racism, ableism, and sexism) of women with disabilities from different minority groups in the UK, and their stories narrate how people, society, and the state through different discriminatory policies and welfare services view them, and how each one had to push real hard to make some space through the closed doors of education, employment and social acceptance.

Two most important areas that enable one to participate in society are education and employment. Those with disabilities face many barriers in accessing a fair and good quality education. Having a disability often means extra time is needed, whether it is for study itself, or for personal care, travel, and maintenance of good health in order to study. As well as this, extra money is needed to cover the cost of special equipment (if those equipment/s are at all available, for example in country like Bangladesh). This makes it difficult to reach higher level of education. But more than these, Vernon shows that it is the attitude of people, even by those who are supposed to be working with welfare services and trained to provide special care, can have negative effect on the education as well as the self-esteem of the student (and especially if she is colored). Moreover, a focus on trying to get disabled children to do what is considered to be 'normal' can get in the way of education. Her research shows that most women who went to special schools felt that their education was of lower quality than it should have been. Segregated all-white schools with their restricted choice of studies didn't allow many of these women to maximize their potential. The ones who attended the mainstream schools felt that the barriers that they experienced there actually sprang from assumption that children with disabilities would not be able to 'cope' and should be sent to special schools. For black and ethnic minority children, Vernon notes, racism can sometimes get in the way of how abilities are assessed. The risk lies in all these is that often disabled people too, can pick up stereotypes about themselves, and gradually it becomes in-built in them. Therefore, the system does not help to empower people with disabilities as it is itself very unhealthy a system.

34. Spicer, Cathy, 1999, Sterilization of Women and Girls with Disabilities- A Literature Review, <http://www.wwda.org.au/steril.html>

35. Hume, J, 1996, Disability, Feminism and Eugenics: Who has the right to decide who should or should not inhabit this world? <http://www.wwda.org.au/eugen.html>

36. Vernon, 1996. A Stranger in Many Camps, in Morris, J eds., Encounters With Strangers: Feminism and Disability, The Women's Press, pp.54-68

The opportunity to work helps women to overcome the low self-esteem created by disability and people's attitudes to it, and it gives them a chance to gain more self-respect and confidence, and for many work is the only thing that stops them from being virtually prisoners in their own homes. *'Work gives people a place in the world, a part in the society. It defines who we are. This is evident in the fact that 'what do you do' is usually the first question that people ask when they get chatting with a stranger...this question implies, what is your position in the society? The answer seems immediately to give people an idea of other person's standard of living, intellectual ability, educational level, and social standing'*³⁷. The problem lies in the painful fact that even though they (the few lucky ones to get the chance to be educated to whatever extent, especially in poor countries) spend considerable number of years of their lives in education, but people with disabilities are not generally expected to work, as there is a general assumption that they are not capable of working.

It is a well known fact that women are, in general, at an economic disadvantage, so it is more than obvious that women with disabilities are more at risk of economically disadvantaged which prohibits them from living independent lives. The meaning of concepts like 'dependence' and 'independence' has re-defined by the disability organizations since the 70s:

*The concept of 'independent living' is a broad one...this means the right to have personal relationships, to be a parent, the right to equal access to education, training, employment, and leisure activities, and the right to participate in the life of the community'*³⁸. Morris admits that many non-disabled women experience a lack of control over their lives because of their economic dependence and sexism.

There are many women with disabilities, who are into relationships, be it marriage or partnership (as per culture). But often state can adopt a discriminatory role when it comes to married disabled women, for example in the USA, where

people with disabilities who marry are seemingly penalized by the government³⁹. Funding for essentials like health coverage, adaptive equipment, and personal assistance is reduced, thereby putting the economic responsibility onto the partner. For women with disability, this can be of a particular disadvantage, leaving them vulnerable to abusive relationships because not only they may become dependent on their partner for personal assistance, but also may turn to them for economic support.

On the other hand, reliance on welfare services does not generally enable these women to participate in personal relationships or engage in work or social activities outside their homes in a way that they would choose. Morris' research shows that if a woman has the resources to purchase assistance in a way that she wants, then it enables her to play an equal part in the household in which she lives and also in personal relationships. Moreover, the control that comes from purchasing assistance can be crucial to a woman's feeling about herself, because that gives her the chance to become a caregiver. As being in a society that is tied up with the image of women as care giving, the ability to use assistance in this way is very important for many disabled women. Caring for others, in the sense of giving emotional and physical support, is part of every human relationship, but unfortunately, disabled women are often prevented from participating in such relationships because they do not receive appropriate/favorable environment.

SECTION 5: WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a developing country having more than 130 million population with a disability prevalence rate of 8.8%⁴⁰ of which about 6.9 million are women⁴¹. According to the constitution of Bangladesh, there are equal rights for men and women, and therefore, women with disabilities are not out of those rights. But the reality is that while these women need special

39. Lee & White, 2001, Economic Sufficiency of Women with Disability

40. Francis, Julian, 1995, Review of the Position of People with Disability in Bangladesh, submitted to AMOD, British High Commission, Dhaka

41. SDNP Bangladesh, International Women's Day 2004, http://www.sdnpsd.org/sdi/international_day/women_day/2004/women_disability.html

37. Ibid. pp.54

38. Morris, Jenny, 1995, Creating a Space For Absent Voices: Disabled women's experience of receiving assistance with daily living activities', Feminist Review, No 51, pp.75-76

attention from each and every platform, they are neglected from families as well as from the society. According to SDNP report, even Human Rights Commission does not report the issue in the country. Bangladesh has almost 20 years history/experience on women's movement, but like many other early feminist movements of the west, women with disabilities still haven't found any strong inclusion in the movements. Post Beijing (1995), Bangladesh government formulated a national work plan that considered 12 issues concerning women/human rights, but women with disabilities issue was not included.

It has been often said that to be a woman and to have a disability is to have a double disadvantage, and if the woman live in a developing country like Bangladesh, then she is trebly disabled. In a study it has been observed that 92% of the women with disabilities are socially or sexually abused within the age of 18. Only 23% women with disabilities know that they have some rights while other's have no knowledge about their human rights or equal rights. In case of education, facilities are very limited and there are only a small number of women with disabilities are getting education through special education, vocational training and home-based education. In terms of economic opportunity, it will be better understood if we take a look at the development budget for the women and compare with the same for women with disabilities:⁴²

Fiscal Year	No. of projects taken by Govt.	Projects for women development	Project have influence on women with disabilities
1999-2000	1379	170 (13%)	00
2000-2001	1299	246 (15%)	00

Gender health especially reproductive health has been a focusing issue in Bangladesh but there is no separate initiative for women with disabilities. But the truth is that a woman with disabilities needs special attention during pregnancy or illness. In Bangladesh where gender disparity is a major problem, and an issue that is constantly challenged by social and religious norms, it is anyone's guess what future a woman with disability has here!

42. SDNP Bangladesh, International Women's Day 2004, http://www.sdnbd.org/sdi/international_day/women_day/2004/women_disability.html

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to go back to Young for her explanation of 'oppression' and 'domination':

*"Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhabit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen. Domination consists in institutional conditions, which inhabit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their action."*⁴³

If we take people with disabilities as a social group, and look at the definitions quoted above, then it will be evident that this particular group is definitely oppressed, dominated, and marginalized. Tom Shakespeare (1994) argues that people with impairment are disabled not just by material discrimination, but also by prejudices, and this prejudice is not just interpersonal but is also implicit in cultural representation, in language and in socialization.⁴⁴ He quotes Morris:

*"Our disability frightens people. They don't want to think that this is something, which could happen to them. So we become separated from common humanity, treated as fundamentally different and alien. Having put up clear barriers between us and them, non-disabled people further hide their fear and discomfort by turning us into objects of pity, comforting themselves by their own kindness and generosity."*⁴⁵

43. Young, 1990, pp.37-38

44. Shakespeare, Tom, 1994, Cultural Representation of Disabled: dustbins for disavowal, in Barton & Oliver eds., 1997, Disability Studies: Past Present Future, Leeds: The Disability Press

45. Morris, J, 1991, as cited in Shakespeare, Tom, 1994, Cultural Representation of Disabled: dustbins for disavowal, in Barton & Oliver eds. 1997, Disability Studies: Past Present Future, Leeds: The Disability Press

A more in depth analysis of this particular group reveals that there lives another sub-group or minority, i.e. women with disabilities who are more oppressed than the men. This is mainly because women are in double disadvantage because of their gender and disability, and often because of color. The essay made an attempt to show that 'women' with disabilities' as a group reinforces the fact *that marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression* as it entails all forms in itself – they are exploited, marginalized, face cultural imperialism to the maximum level (as being the ultimate 'other' separated from the 'normal'), are more vulnerable to violence, and thus making them powerless in the systematic institutional exclusion process.

I do not undermine the fact that disabled men are not in an enviable better position, but it cannot be denied that women with disabilities do face more social stigma, oppression and exclusion from society. Women with disabilities are at a definite disadvantage with barriers such as negative impact of self-identity, lack of independence, discriminatory attitudes towards rehabilitation, unequal opportunities to participate in education and employment etc. to cross. Without the opportunity for full participation, women with disability will never be able to be economically sufficient which will lead to extreme poverty, physical dependence, and the inability to leave abusive relationships. Therefore, it is clear that within the marginalized group of 'people with disabilities, women form another sub-group and because of their gender experience a multiplicity of barriers resulting from one or more combination of disablism, racism and sexism. As one interviewee in Vernon's research put it, '*It happens singularly, plurally, and multiply, and it is the totality that counts at the end of the day. You are thought of as completely inferior because you are all three things*'⁴⁶. No other form of oppression, therefore, could be more dangerous and highly gendered than marginalization.

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⁴⁶ Vernon, 1996, pp.68

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